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ABSTRACT

Two things in particular could change the status of students of color in our elementary and secondary education system and make improved academic achievement possible. One is providing role models that students can relate to in the classrooms, and the other is getting families involved in their children's education. A study on family life and school achievement by Reginald M. Clark argues that the family's main contribution to the child's success in school is made through the parent-child relationship. The overall quality of a family's lifestyle is the determinant of whether children come prepared for academic performance. Children who know what is expected of them and who experience the intergenerational transmission of behavior patterns that emphasize education perform better in school. Parents must be interested in their children's activities. They must have and communicate high expectations for school and home performance. Disadvantaged circumstances must not be used as excuses for failing to support children or grandchildren, because parent involvement is the key to academic and social success. Contains an annotated bibliography of four items and two references. (SLD)

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TEST SCORES, SCHOOL PERFORMANCE AND PARENTING ISSUES: ASSURING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

subsidiary topic

The Connection Between Family Life and School Achievement: Given a Supportive Family, Black Children Can Succeed

presented at the

NATIONAL BLACK CHILD DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

National Conference
Seattle, Washington
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America's on time high school graduation rate has remained steady for more than twenty years, hovering somewhere between 75% and 80 % (Huelskamp, 1993). However all one has to do is attend a high school graduation in any urban city to find that the honor students in the graduating class are mostly white and Asian. Black students are becoming *fewer and fewer among the graduates*, for the most significant dropout problems are among black youths and other youths of color in urban schools throughout America.

I'm convinced that there are two ways, among many, that could change the status of our students of color in our K-12 system, as well as increase the number of black students entering our colleges and universities: providing role models in our classrooms whom students can relate to, and getting the families of black children more involved in their education. I will discuss today, getting families involved in their children's education, for I believe that given a supportive family, black children can succeed in our nation's classrooms.

There has been a significant study on *FAMILY LIFE AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT* conducted by Reginald M. Clark, researcher, consultant, and lecturer on educational policy, and though what was found from the study was made known in 1983, much of what was found still rings true today. Clark's basic contention was that the family's main contribution to the child's success in school is made through the parent's dispositions and interpersonal relationships with the child - not the composition of the household; that there is a connection between family life and school achievement.

Some of us have heard administrators, counselors, teachers and others involved with the education of our black children say that *black children cannot achieve academic success - that because many black children come from divorced parents, households with limited incomes, are latch-key children, who live in depressed neighborhoods* - these children do not come with the requisite mental attitude for acceptable and desirable behavior for learning in the classroom. Reginald Clark's study, and other programs that I will talk about today, proves that this is just not true. Clark found that it was the interaction between parents and children, the organization of the household, and the cohesiveness of the family that contributes to high attainment. Put a different way, it *is the overall quality of a family's lifestyle* that determines whether children come prepared for academically competent performance in the classroom.

Let me share with you some of the things that Clark found when he investigated and talked to members of black families regarding the aspirations of their children. Just before I do, let me state that Clark pointed out that to aid in the analysis of his assumption that ***family intactness is not a necessary or sufficient condition for high quality learning in the home and school,*** families were chosen that fell into one of four distinct family groups:

1. Two parent families with at least one high achieving 12 grade child
2. One parent families with at least one high achieving 12th grade child 4.
3. Two parent families with at least one low achieving 12th grade child
4. One parent families with at least one low achieving 12th grade child

I'm going to begin with what was found in homes where students were low achievers, for what was found in homes where students were high achievers, I want to be remembered most.

What was found in homes where students were low achievers

The children from these homes had very few stimulating experiences provided by their parents or others, had no one to support them generally, including their teachers. Many of their parents were in psychological and emotional turmoil. They had lower expectations of playing a role in their children's schooling, and had lower expectations that their children would go beyond secondary schooling. The siblings who were low achievers were less structured at home, and there was often conflict among family members. And though Clark did not mention this next point, I have found in my observations with some parents; they simply don't give a hoot about how their children do in school. For them, *school is a free baby-sitting service.*

What was found in homes where students were high achievers

Parents in these homes took the responsibility for guiding, nursing, and protecting their children. The interpersonal communication patterns tended to be marked by frequent dialogue, and strong parental encouragement in academic pursuits. These parents also set clear and consistent limits for their young, had warm and nurturing interactions, and consistently monitored how their children used their time and space. *The specific characteristics of the parents' individual child rearing style was determined, in large*

part, by their own upbringing and their perceptions of the degree of community support and/or danger to themselves and their children.

Other things found in families of high achieving students

Historical Experiences in the home

• *An intergenerational transmission of behavior patterns* - Parents talked to their children about the relationships that they'd had with their parents as youngsters. They also let the children know that there were clearly defined role boundaries when they were children, and the role boundaries would remain: children were children, and parents were parents. There was no such thing as symmetrical relationships between children and parents. These parents also felt that their parents had supported them, communicated with them, had been diligent and direct in their supervision, and had loved them. They wanted to provide the same for their children. These parents also had come to realize as youngsters themselves, that the family's needs came first (economic), and that all the family's physical and spiritual resources must be used to meet those needs.

Speaking about *spiritual resources,* I believe they have always been significant in the black families in America, but I sometimes wonder whether some of us have gone to the extreme, and think that God is going to do it all for us. My parents always said that, "God helps those who help themselves." What they meant by that was that *God gives us health, strength, and a thinking brain. We must use these things to the very best of our abilities...for the betterment of ourselves, our children, our community, and our nation.*

Student's Early Experiences in School

- All of these children in Clark's investigation could recall having at least one particularly warm, supportive classroom environment in elementary and middle school. The high quality classroom experiences were apparently still helping the students feel good about their abilities. Too, their parents had encouraged their children to visit the library regularly, and they enrolled them in some type of enrichment program, e.g., piano lessons.

Parent's Early Socialization Behavior Toward Child

- As young children, these students were taught pragmatic morals. They learned the difference between right and wrong - what was acceptable and unacceptable behavior. They also learned under what circumstances certain social behavior was appropriate and how to judge when that same behavior was in appropriate. **Children knew what was expected of them.**

- The families participated in rituals such as conversation at the dinner table, reading or telling stories, and group singing. It was out of these verbal activities Clark believed, that made the youngsters learn to make broad, universalistic interpretations, as well as understand context-specific meanings of issues.

- Parents were assisted by expert caregivers - relatives and other committed parents. They were also assisted by older siblings.

• A significant amount of television watching was not permitted, for parents believed that television programs influenced the way a person thinks.

• The children spent a great deal of time in their home with other family members, *but* an increasing amount of the adolescent's time was spent outside the home. The parents felt that their children needed to learn how to socialize outside the home, that it was important. However, these parents carefully defined rules regarding "socially acceptable behavior outside the home."

• These parents exercised an "authoritative" guidance of their children's time and space, as opposed to an "authoritarian" one. In the first instance, the parent expected and ***modeled*** acceptable behavior. In the latter, and used by parents with lower achieving students, they expected their children to behave appropriately, when often acceptable behavior on the part of the parents, was not modeled.

• Though may of these families had been victims of institutional strictures, they avoided being traumatized by them. They found mutual support groups, or individuals within their families that supported them. One might say they believed in *kin and friend*.

• The high achieving students' parents were further distinguished by their hopeful, forthright sensibilities about themselves and their children. They possessed a belief in their own ability to see to it that somehow their children's need would be provided for. They

had a strong sense of direction, and a hope or belief that things would be all right, or in some cases, get better. They also had a strong sense of self-reliance, and a deep self pride, and a sense of seriousness about their lives.

Now that we know what attributes that parents have to have to help make black youngsters successful in our schools, and especially those who come from families where these attributes are **absent,** what can schools do, or what can those of us who are concerned parents do, to help the parents help their children who come from homes where parents have a very bleak outlook on life? For, we know that parents need to take responsibility for their children's physical, emotional, and intellectual well-being.

Some things we can do

We can start by itemizing the things that parents can do to help improve their children's success in schools. Now, I'm sure that this seems like a pretty silly notion to some of you, but I believe that many parents, though they might have good intentions, honestly may not know what to do. These parents must be made to realize that they must become interested in their children's home activities; they must consistently monitor their children's time and space; they must consistently involve themselves with activities concerning their children's studies - converse with them, provide help if they can, listen to them read, or listen to them explain an idea. They must encourage their children's efforts, and praise them when they do good work. They should always have high expectation of them - at school and in *disciplined roles at home*: for example, certain days to do chores

around the home; specific hours and specific programs that children can watch on television; a set daily time to do homework assignments, and specific places where they can and cannot eat; can and cannot play, or entertain their friends if they are older children. Parents must provide family standards for their children and expect them to follow them. If they do this at home, then it will not be so difficult for these children to follow standards at school. And, I too believe that one of the most important things that parents can do for their children is to be a role model for them - exhibiting those characteristics that make for effective socialization; being honest, caring about each family member, learning to share, learning to compromise, learning how to resolve conflict among siblings, and learning how to exhibit respect for each family member.

The parents are provided with this itemized list. Now what? We must take it a few steps further, for you and I know some of these parents, and that many of them, given a list of things that they could do, are not going to do them easily or consistently without a whole lot of support; for as Clark pointed out, many of these parents themselves are, or feel that they are victims of persistent, devastating traumas in life.

I want to reiterate part of that statement that I just made - that **many of us know some of these parents**. Some of them could be in our own families, or families that we know. I know a few. Two such parents are two of my own children. They both happen to be single parent families rearing three children in each family, by themselves. They both work outside the home - they are not on welfare; and let me interject here, that this is a

typical pattern in many black families today. All too typical it seems. One daughter jokes with me that I don't have to feel so smug because I have a Ph.D., that so does she - for she's a professional hair dresser. The other daughter is a computer analyst. But even though they have a means to make a living for their children, they often become discouraged, and sometimes disgruntled with life, for they feel that life has dealt them a bitter blow (in their cases, failed marriages). So, we have to be there for them! - as parents and as grandparents. I cannot tell you the number of times that we've picked up grandchildren from this place or that, baby-sat, played with them, took them on outings, or even going to an occasional parent conference or school meeting, when their parents cannot face another task at the time. Yet, at the same time, we talk to the parents, letting them know that they cannot use **whatever the circumstances** as an excuse, that life goes on, and that they have to be there for their children as we have been there and are there for them. These are simple, very basic ways that we can help parents who may need help. Yet, I've talked to folk who frequently say, "I've reared my children, and I don't intend to start all over again with grandchildren." Well, as long as many of us have that kind of attitude, many of our black children, especially those from circumstances where their parents feel a sense of hopelessness, will not succeed in school.

Another way to help. Those of us who are in positions where we can make a connection to help these parents make some positive changes in their lives, must do so. If we are in a position in our job, for example, and an opening comes up where we believe that persons we know can benefit from the position, we must speak up. We have to be

honest, of course. It behooves us to let the employer know that the person has excellent organizational and computer skills, for example, but has not had much experience outside the home. We certainly can ask the employer to try the person, for a given number of months. These opportunities may be rare, but, if each one who can recommend and speak up for a person does so, it could help. It's certainly worth a try.

In some cases, though, parent may not have *any marketable skills to land a job,* even if a job came knocking at their door. We must encourage these parents to get some training, for there are all sorts of programs for adult learners in our communities - and, if we have to help them get started to find the school for training - then let's do it. Parents who lack basic reading, writing, and mathematics skills cannot be expected to get profitable employment - nor, can they be expected to help their children learn these skills at home. If we do all we can to help get these parents into some adult school and or training, they will feel so much better in the long run, and their children will definitely benefit as a result of increased learning on the part of their parents. And, the money that may come in from profitable employment, will be most welcome I am sure!

We can help these parents get involved with positive activities with their children. Here in Seattle, in the Southend neighborhood, we have what we call the "Powerful Schools." This is a nonprofit coalition of four elementary schools, local businesses and community organizations dedicated to strengthening community and creating state-of-the art schools in that part of the city. During the school year, after school, all sorts of things are offered

in these schools where parents and children can participate together - photography, cake decorating, calligraphy, computer classes, choral music, drawing and painting, poetry, and creative writing. Some of these classes are taught by parents in these communities as well as by professionals. Most of the classes are free, though in some cases where materials are needed, a small fee is charged. Transportation is even provided between the four schools. In the Spring, the powerful schools put on a program, where talents of the administrators, teachers, parents and children are showcased. The program in 1994 consisted of Lummi dancers, choirs, principals rapping, and a dramatization of the history of computers. What a wonderful way to involve parents in activities with their children! And, for some parents, this presents a non-threatening way for them to get to a school site, meet other adults in the community, see some of the classrooms within the buildings, and to see how they can be a part of the teaching team both at school and at home. Clearly the administrators in these buildings are not ignoring or mis-diagnosing the special needs of these young people and their families.

Still another way to get parents involved in their children's school activities is to invite them to a PTA meeting, **even picking them up if need be to make sure that they get there**. And, once they get there, sit with them to make them feel comfortable, and a part of the group. These things are simple enough to do, but here again, many of us who do feel comfortable, are so eager to be in the limelight, we could care less whether some parents feel comfortable or not if, or when they do come to meetings. Some of us who call ourselves concerned parents, totally ignore them! We ignore them because they may

not be dressed in suits, or they live five blocks down the street from us, or maybe live in a different neighborhood that e perceive as lower class than our own - you know, those sorts of insignificant kinds of things. And I regret to say, that I'm not speaking about how whites treat blacks in these instances, though obviously some of them do these things to us. I'm speaking about how blacks treat other blacks. And, for the most of us sitting here today at this posh hotel, I'd venture to say that we are only a few paychecks from the circumstances of many of these parents that some of us may tend to look down on! So, it behooves us, we who can, and most of us can: to help parents overcome some of the emotional turmoil that abounds in their lives - mistrust, discord, confusion, powerlessness, and often anger. For, families whose members are emotionally able to love, cooperate, support one another, and find some **support outside the home**, are usually more satisfied with their lives, and these families enjoy a stronger achievement orientation and help to produce competent students.

Today, I hope that you conclude along with me, that the evidence from the study that Clark conducted, highlights the necessity of strong parental involvement and encouragement of their children, if children are to succeed academically in our classrooms throughout America. I've pointed out some ways, too, that we can help parents to do this - and, I reiterate, I'm speaking of parents whose children are less successful in school, due to **lack of parental involvement with their youngsters...**Those parents who need a great deal of confidence in their abilities and support in many of their endeavors.

Family life has always played a critical role in educational and social development. There is much research out today that supports this idea. I will leave packets of information at the front table that highlights much of this research. Accordingly, it is imperative that parents realize that if they value education and are engaged in some aspect of learning - then, most likely their children will view education in the same manner; that participation in their children's learning will provide all sorts of benefits for self, family , and the community.

Annotated Bibliography

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Examined the relationship between parental involvement in their children's schooling and children's motivation and academic achievement. Subjects were of 300 11-14 year olds. Data from parent, student, and teacher evaluations suggest that parental involvement manifests itself in many ways. Children who are are confident in school actually may push parents to become actively involved in school.

MacPherson, Ann. **Parent-Professional Partnership: A Review and Discussion of Issues**. Early Childhood Development and Care, v86, 1993.

Examines issues that affect the partnership between parents and school personnel. Discusses the benefits of parental involvement in education, the impact of parental participation in local public services that affect education, and issues of power sharing in both contexts.

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The key element in parental involvement is a sense of parent-school partnership. Parents can participate as decisions-makers, helpers, ans coeducators. Facilitating parental involvement means removing three barriers: biases, limited vies of parental involvement, and perceptions about schools.

Simoni, Jane M, and Adelman, Howard S. **School Based Mutual Support Groups for Low Income Parents**. Urban Review, v25, Dec. 1993.

School based mutual support groups (MSGs) are proposed to enhance school involvement of parents from lower socio-economic and ethnic minority backgrounds. A school based MSG format is presented with results of a survey of interests from 62 parents (36 respondents and 26 nonrespondents) and a discussion of a pilot demonstration in 3 urban elementary schools.

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